COVER SHEET

When you're a viola player, it helps to have a sense of humour – it's the best defence against all those viola jokes. Bernard Hoey, violist with the new-music quintet Topology, often expresses his humour in a musical form, as when he introduced the première performance of what he called a newly discovered work. The audience started to fall about as soon as they heard the first four notes. Four notes was all it took to carry everyone back to 1975, as Topology launched into Bernard's arrangement of *Mama Mia* .

The Abba song is taken to a lot of strange places in the arrangement. Hoey revels in presenting several different keys at once, or stretching the contour of the melody into extreme leaps, or crunching through riffs with clusters of notes played on the piano with fists and forearms. Through it all, the original song emerges intact, its distinctive features completely recognisable, in a way that is difficult to imagine for most of today's chart-toppers. This is because Abba retained a focus on melody and harmony – transportable elements which lend themselves to flexible arrangement. The Swedish stars (Agnetha Foltskog, Bjorn Ulvaeus, Benny Andersson and Anni-Frid Synni-Lyngstad) had their heyday at the tail end of a major shift in popular musical taste towards texture and timbre (and away from melody) as primary focus.

A simple way of putting this might be to say that Abba's music is more about notes than sounds. It shares this attribute with the music of composers such as J.S. Bach, whose works have a long history of being rearranged for wildly various purposes, from Mozart's string trio arrangements of chorale preludes to the first popular synthesiser record, Walter (now Wendy) Carlos' *Switched on Bach* . The *Art of Fugue* is so independent from the incidentals of instrumental sound that its score does not specify instruments. Speed is also negotiable - I once heard an experimental performance of a Bach keyboard work played extremely slowly, at about a tenth of its normal tempo, and was amazed at how much integrity the work retained, remaining a thoroughly satisfying musical experience.

Part of what makes Bach great is that he can build such flexibility into his works and also realise them with such intense physicality, rooted in the realities of the instruments. As Stravinsky observed, “you can smell the resin in his violin parts, taste the reeds in the oboes.” Abba similarly lavished great care on achieving “the sound” in their records. Abba's highly imaginative sound engineer/producer Michael Tretow devised many innovations in this quest, such as recording a guitar in a swimming pool hall to get just the right echo in *So Long*, or overdubbing vocal tracks at slightly different tape speeds. "They knew exactly what they wanted,” he said recently, “and worked much harder than anyone on achieving that goal.” The realisation of their songs, particularly the exceptionally clean and clear vocal performances by Agnetha and Anni-Frid was crucial in their success.

But for me, the essence of the songs is in the sequences of notes and harmonies. They survive many transitions, retaining their identity in the hundreds of cover versions by artists from Nana Mouskouri to U2 (and dozens of imitation bands).

Should Abba and Bach be mentioned in the same breath? Well, I wouldn't want to push the comparison much further. How does one compare music written to glorify God with music designed to sell as much product as possible? Ok, it's not that simple – Bach composed for money too, and Abba was not simply after money (a case in point: they recently turned down a billion dollars to reunite). But there remains a large gap in what formed the music. Bach made music with as much splendour and subtlety as he could as a means of reflecting something of heaven, whereas Abba made music to grab listeners' attention and refuse to let go.

This is no mean feat. “Once you heard an Abba song, you knew it,” comments composer Philip Houghton. “That's a very difficult trick to pull off.” Elena Kats-Chernin agrees. “The hardest thing to do as a composer is to write something catchy, to get rid of what doesn't matter” she says. “Abba's ability with this was pure genius.”

I spoke to a number of composers about their thoughts on Abba. Several of them were less shy than I am about making grand comparisons. “In terms of structure” says Paul Stanhope, “the songs bear comparison to Mozart's arias in their strength; there are no weak links.” Martin Mackerras sees parallels with Mozart's Clarinet Concerto. “In *Name of the Game* , there is section after section after section flowing into each other, just as the melodies constantly flow in Mozart's Concerto, always remaining perfect melodies – it's such a contrast with the standard verse-chorus-bridge structure of so much pop, and to me a sign of genius.” Tom Adeney noticed a similar connection when attending Mozart's youthful opera *La Finta Giardiniera* . “During the interval I overheard *Dancing Queen* from a nearby nightclub and thought ‘my God, this is amazing.' My ears were tuned to Mozart and picked up the great clarity of design in Abba's song. There is no waste. It achieves Mozart's ideal – a perfect match between the concept of the song and its realisation. It really does sound like a young girl dancing.”

Dancing Queen seems to strike a chord with many composers. Perhaps it has to do with how well the melody is sustained over a long period - as every composer knows, a notoriously difficult task to achieve. The verses, low in the voice, are ambiguous, shifting between major and relative minor. So when the chorus soars in, dispelling ambiguities with repeated affirmations of the major key, a sense of ecstasy is achieved. Such a combination of delayed resolution and instant hooks is not commonplace.

Another song with a big chorus is *Knowing Me Knowing You* . Five interweaving vocal parts (in unusually lush counterpoint for pop) contrast sharply with the simple unison texture of the verse. Textural contrasts are also important in *Mama Mia* , where the staccato chorus jumps out after the flowing verses, accentuated by the sudden removal of the bass.

Like Mozart and Bach, Abba tried their hand at a huge range of genres, synthesising them, along with their native folk music, into a highly personal style. Their many early pastiches – the reggae of *Tropical Loveland* , the Suzie Quatro hard rock of *So Long*, the Phil Spector wall-of-sound of *I've Been Waiting for You* – gave them the skills to be able to conjure whole styles with a single phrase in the later songs. They arranged these in full-bodied textures with intricacies that repay repeated hearings.

“For me, Abba is the sound of freedom,” says Elena Kats-Chernin. “The Soviet authorities tried to stop Western pop radio getting to us, but I managed to hear *Waterloo* over the Voice of America, and it was one of my earliest experiences of outside music. I loved it, and I think they had incredible skills to create such concentrated pop.”

Cellist Chris Patrick points to Abba's avoidance of the shallowness of teeny pop. “Underneath the bright, colourful exterior lies a melancholy sense of impending doom, which I find irresistible.”

“They were brilliant at gauging what was allowable within the pop formula and then surprising you” says Andy Arthurs. “In *Waterloo* the chorus goes down just a bit further than you expect. And in *Under Attack* the chorus comes just before you expect it, mirroring the lyric.”

“They managed to skirt the fine line, on the boundary of being utterly syrupy but not falling in. That's what makes them so exciting,” says Matthew Hindson. “What kept them out of the trap was quirky little surprises in the melodies – they came up with great hooks, but also kept you guessing. And they had such a big sound – not an intimate sound, but a theatrical sound.”

Perhaps Abba's natural home was always in the theatre. Like their contemporaries the Beatles (Bjorn Ulveus is three years younger than Paul McCartney), Abba emulated the two-man teams of musical theatre – Rodgers and Hammerstein, Lerner and Loewe, George and Ira Gershwin, even Gilbert and Sullivan. Benny and Bjorn worked in ways more typical of the old tunesmiths than of rock musicians, putting in nine-to-five days songwriting in their hideaway shack on a Stockholm island.

They generally followed the Tin Pan Alley approach of composing tunes first and then supplying lyrics to fit, often choosing words more for musical qualities than for meaning, as in *Take a Chance on Me* and *Chiquitita* , where the quick flow of consonants creates a percussive effect. Many of their songs, particularly the epic *I'm a Marionette* , find them toying with theatrical settings.

It was not surprising that the two songwriters headed into theatre as soon as they could. While the two female singers were in recovery after the break-up of Abba, Benny and Bjorn created the West End musical *Chess* with lyricist Tim Rice. They have since written other highly successful works for the stage, including *Kristina fran Duvemala* and *Mama Mia* , soon to open in Melbourne .

All of this activity cements further the songwriters' connection with a time when pop songs were identified with their written and performed versions. As we have moved further away from musical notation and have come to embrace recording as the definitive location of a piece of music, the focus has shifted to texture and timbre. A song on today's charts is often completely dependent on the sonic properties of, say, the drum beat. This is possible in a digital age; in 1975, you had to sound good on AM car radios where such detail gets lost.

As musical sophistication has increased in the area of sonic awareness, it has probably decreased in the more traditional areas. It is not uncommon to hear comments, particularly from young pop stars, about the complexity of Abba's songs – songs that would have seemed simple indeed to the likes of Cole Porter and Jerome Kern. This is not a negative or positive development – it is simply a change, and a change in which Abba participated, particularly in their last songs, such as *The Day Before You Came* in which texture takes primacy. “I get more from the noises than the tunes” comments John Rodgers.

Not every composer I spoke to gushed with praise. “It's packaged air” according to Vincent Plush. “It's a sad commentary on the standard of musical taste that we have passed down Abba as something to be taken seriously. Many of us find such blatant commercialisation quite repulsive.”

I myself took a long time to warm to Abba. It was only in carefully listening to the melodies that I discovered their hidden charms. Let's not fool ourselves – pop music is basically about making money. “The fact that Abba never tried to conceal that is one reason I admire them,” says Stephen Cronin. But musical vitality has a way of finding itself into all sorts of unexpected places, and here with Abba, hiding behind the plastic façade of disposable pop, is something transcendent – a euphoric, irrepressible and profound joy.

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